

Extra Work or Work Extra: FIVE STEPS FOR STUDYING VOCABULARY

IN AN EFFORT TO HELP LOW-ACHIEVING STUDENTS AT AN-NAJAH NATIONAL University, I came up with a way to help them study vocabulary. Limited vocabulary had affected the students' success with reading passages and made it difficult for them to pass the required English courses. The classroom technique that I describe below made students more interested in the reading passages and thus helped them increase their vocabulary and in the end have better overall performance in the course.

Before, when students were having difficulty with their English course, they were given extra work in the form of three short quizzes, two homework assignments, and a library assignment based on paragraphs selected from the material covered in class. This plan had been known as the "Salvation Plan." The quizzes

covered skills such as understanding reading passages, guessing, knowing some grammatical structures, and using words in sentences. The students were given time to prepare and ask questions before they took the quizzes. To calculate the final grade, results of the quizzes, homework, and library assignment were added to students' grades for their regular classes. The plan has worked well with some students, but it has failed with others.

So I decided to do more to help the students pass. I had a group of seven students known to be good achievers in their majors at the university. These students were studying English. My basic goal was not to have them be low achievers in English! That was why I had to change the way I handled them. I had to start from scratch.

The first step was to interview them and listen to the students on a friendly and informal basis. I discovered that the extra tests and quizzes that they had been taking had added to their frustration, since they neither solved the students' problems with English nor landed them a passing grade.

I tried a simple approach that depended on their own needs and interests but demanded extra work on their part. My approach was to teach them vocabulary. I prepared a long list of basic and functional vocabulary that covered the eight passages that they had to learn during the semester. The eight passages were divided over eight weeks so that my plan was parallel to their regular class. We had daily meetings to learn five words a week. I asked students to look at a list of words taken from the passages and to select five words from each passage that they recognized, liked, or wanted to learn.

The textbook for the course was *Raise the Issues* by Carol Numrich. Eight chapters were chosen for the technique; one topic for each week. Following are the chapter titles, the words the students chose to study, and the reasons they gave in support of their choice.

Passage 1: Men Who Know Where Their Bullets Are Going

1. *invade*: related to their situation because their cities have been invaded by the occupation army.
2. *destroy/damage*: an action that they experience when soldiers destroy houses and trees.

3. *advocate*: The word is close in pronunciation to the Arabic equivalent: *avokato*.
4. *territory*: a word that students often hear on TV in "the occupied territories," which means their country.
5. *deer*: The student confused this word with the word *dear*.

Passage 2: Why I Hunt

1. *predator*: the student thinks that *pre* means before and wants to know the meaning of *dator*.
2. *prey*: the student thinks that this word is related to mosques and *praying*.
3. *pursue*: the student thinks it is difficult to pronounce and wants to learn it.
4. *roam*: the student confused its pronunciation with the word *room*.
5. *wrestle with*: related to free wrestling, a sport that the student likes to watch on TV.

Passage 3: Case Study: The Main vs. Rogerson Case

1. *arrest*: the student himself was once arrested by the soldiers.
2. *jail*: the student mentioned the word *prison*, so this word was introduced.
3. *debate*: the word sounded interesting to be learnt.
4. *manslaughter*: the student knows the first part of the word, *man*, and wants to know the other part.
5. *accidental killing*: the word *accident* is familiar.

Passage 4: To Know More About Less or Less About More

1. *specialist*: the word *special* is familiar.
2. *explosion*: the student knows the meaning in Arabic. The word is related to his daily life.
3. *jacks-of-all-trades*: an expression that is written in bold type in the passage and sounds important.
4. *excel*: related to computers.
5. *available*: *-able* indicates the word is an adjective, but the word is not familiar.

Passage 5: Case Study: Harvard University's Core Curriculum

1. *Harvard*: the student heard it in class.
2. *curriculum*: the teacher wrote it on the board and repeated it more than once.

3. *courses*: related to the subjects the student registers for at the university.
4. *simply*: the meaning of simple is clear, but the *-ly* ending is confusing.
5. *education*: the student is majoring in Education.

Passage 6: Economic Might vs. Ecologic Right

1. *habitat*: may be related to *happy*.
2. *life*: the student pronounces it as the verb *live*.
3. *die*: related to death.
4. *scientist*: related to science, which the student doesn't like.
5. *extinct*: the student chose the word haphazardly.

Passage 7: Just Say 'No' to Drugs

1. *drugs*: a famous topic.
2. *black market*: the literal translation in Arabic means the same.
3. *addict*: the student knew that the topic was drugs, so he gave the Arabic word and asked for its equivalent in English.
4. *hashish*: the same word is used in Arabic. The word sounded more like Arabic than English to the student.
5. *however*: the student has seen the word often but doesn't know what it means.

Passage 8: Have All The Heroes Died?

1. *hero*: it appears at the very beginning of the passage and is unfamiliar.
2. *baseball*: the word sounds familiar.
3. *political*: related to politics; a topic that affects the student's life.
4. *criticism*: difficult to pronounce, although it has been seen often.
5. *role-model*: the student knows what *model* means and wants to know what *role* means.

Weekly meetings

As mentioned above, we had five meetings per week to study the vocabulary words students selected. Each of the five meetings highlighted a different aspect of the vocabulary: pronunciation, word form, dictionary work, reading, and using the words in context. The format for each of the meetings is described below.

First meeting: Pronunciation

- Pronounce correctly the five words that they have chosen.

- React to these words by trying to connect them to other words, or events, persons, etc.
- Give examples of words with similar pronunciation.

Second meeting: Word form

- Recognize the forms of the words (verb, noun, adjective, adverb).
- Identify word endings for verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs.
- Provide other words of each form.

Third meeting: Dictionary work

- Review the alphabet and find the words in the dictionary.
- Learn basic dictionary symbols such as v. for verbs, n. for nouns, etc.
- Learn the meanings of the words.

Fourth meeting: Reading

- Go to the passage and locate the words one by one.
- Read aloud the sentences in which the words appear.
- Explain the sentences.
- Translate the sentences into Arabic.
- Find connections with titles, pictures, etc.
- Analyze ideas in the passage.

Fifth meeting: Using words in context

In a final ambitious step, the students were asked to use each of the words in meaningful sentences similar to the original ones by:

- Changing singular nouns to plural.
- Changing tenses from past to present or present to past.
- Changing passive to active or vice versa.
- Changing positive to negative.
- Providing a synonym or antonym to the words if possible.
- Using noun reference or new words.
- Coming up with their own sentences, if possible.

Following are examples of the sentences that students wrote in the fifth and last meeting. **Note:** The sentences appear exactly as they were written by the students; errors in grammar and spelling were later corrected with the students.

1. **Original sentence:** Wooded areas across the nation are *invaded* by men carrying rifles.

- Student's sentence:** Our cities are invade by Israel army.
2. **Original sentence:** Animal *advocates* believe that hunters have no soul.
Student's sentence: My brother is advocate.
 3. **Original sentence:** I am a hunter, a *predator*.
Student's sentence: Soldiers are *predator*.
 4. **Original sentence:** To *pursue* the thing one wants would be a waste of time.
Student's sentence: I *pursue* the dog.
 5. **Original sentence:** The act has already helped to save the gray wolf, the bald eagle, and the alligator from *extinction*.
Student's sentence: The act has not helped to save the elephant from *extinction*.
 6. **Original sentence:** *Specialists* flourish in every field of life.
Student's sentence: I *specialist* in computer.
 7. **Original sentence:** The core *curriculum* offered at Harvard University has long been a model for successful program of general education.
Student's sentence: The core curriculum at An-Najah University offer 18 courses.
 8. **Original sentence:** A *hero*, it is said, is someone who is larger than life.
Student's sentence: Our *heroes* are died.

I believe that the students' achievement was a success for the reasons I list below.

1. The process was simple and proved effective because it was based on the students' interests and needs, which increased their enthusiasm.
2. The students thought that it was impossible for them to forget the things that they learned in this way as it was related to their personal experience.
3. Students showed a strong desire to face their fears of English language by trying to read English texts.
4. They solved the problems they had had with English for two or three years and finally passed the course.

A student who was repeating the course for a fifth time concluded that learning English language was not bad at all, thus changing his attitudes towards English from negative to positive ones. My own experience with these students was very enjoyable. I felt it was worth sharing this simple but effective technique with my fellow English teachers.

Reference

Numrich, C. 1994. *Raise the issues: An integrated approach to critical thinking*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishing Group.

Wafa Abu Shmais has a Master's in TEFL and is an Instructor in the English Department at An-Najah National University, Nablus, West Bank.